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SENSITIVE
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DEPT FOR WHA/CEN AND WHA/PPC, ALSO DEPT FOR USAID/OFDA: ROB
THAYER, JAMES KESSINGER

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [EAID](#) [AEMR](#) [ASEC](#) [PHUM](#) [SEVN](#)
KFLO, CS
SUBJECT: MAGNITUDE 6.2 EARTHQUAKE STRIKES COSTA RICA,
DAMAGE LOCALIZED BUT DEVASTATING

REF: A. SAN JOSE 0010 (NOTAL)
[1](#)B. 08 SAN JOSE 928 (NOTAL)
[1](#)C. 08 SAN JOSE 800
[1](#)D. 08 SAN JOSE 197

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: On January 8, a localized but devastating 6.2 magnitude earthquake struck Costa Rica about 30 kilometers north of San Jose, near Poas volcano, a popular tourist destination. As of January 14, there were 23 known dead, nearly 100 injured and 11 still missing. The killer earthquake directly affected 61 communities (over 100,000 persons), by extensively damaging or destroying homes, businesses, bridges and roads. One major hydroelectric plant, buried under feet of mud, may not resume operations for a year, according to GOCR officials. The area continues to get aftershocks and some locations remain unstable; there could be more displaced persons over time.

[1](#)2. (U) On January 9, four JTF-B helicopters and 34 personnel deployed to Costa Rica to conduct rescue operations, working side by side with the GOCR's National Emergency Commission (FEMA-equivalent CNE). The Ambassador also exercised his disaster assistance authority to commit \$50,000 to pay for commercial helicopter rental to augment host GOCR and JTF-B assets (Ref A). JTF-B helicopters evacuated more than 40 victims, including two injured, and transported nearly 200 rescue personnel plus some equipment over a three-day period. In a regional first, JTF-B worked side by side with a Colombian Air Force UH-60 Blackhawk that also deployed to assist. This earthquake assistance follows on the heels of extensive USG (via JTF-B) flood disaster assistance in late November in the Limon province of Costa Rica (septel). JTF-B should again be commended for another short-notice, weekend deployment to Costa Rica, and for its outstanding performance while here. END SUMMARY.

A KILLER QUAKE

[1](#)3. (U) At 1:21 P.M. local time on January 8, a devastating 6.2 magnitude earthquake struck communities in the mountainous area around Poas volcano, located about 30 kilometers north of San Jose. The quake occurred at a depth of approximately six kilometers. Widescale destruction and landslides affected more than 100,000 inhabitants and killed

at least 23 people with more feared lost. More than seven kilometers of highway were obliterated in the event, with houses and vehicles buried underneath huge landslides. The road that connects Vara Blanca to San Miguel is the most severely damaged, with the town of Cinchona essentially wiped off the map; road sections as long as several kilometers fell off the steep embankment and disappeared. At least nine major bridges were destroyed and most search and rescue operations were initially only possible using air assets.

¶4. (U) Although localized, the damage and casualties were worse than originally expected. In addition to the dead and missing, over 2000 people are living in shelters and more than 500 homes/small businesses were severely damaged or completely destroyed. The GOCR reports that water, electricity and communications have been restored to over 80 percent of the affected areas, but full infrastructure reconstruction, especially of roads, may take a long time. One major hydroelectric plant, buried under feet of mud, may not resume operations for a year. Costa Rican officials currently estimate that the earthquake caused more than USD 100 million of damage. The GOCR has asked for a loan in the amount of USD 65 million (and the national assembly is working to approve that request) from the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development to help address this catastrophe.

¶5. (U) The Cinchona earthquake, as it is now being called, also caused significant environmental damage, primarily as a result of extensive landslides and siltation of creeks and rivers. Costa Rican volcanologists told us on January 13 that they were "shocked" at the extent of damage near the

earthquake's epicenter. Previously forested ravines were marred by significant slope failures, leaving entire hillsides virtually denuded. Although the affected Sarapiquí River continues to flow, the water is now moving over a viscous mud layer that has coated everything in its path, potentially killing all the fish by depriving them of oxygen. Local scientists worry that the formation of natural dams and the extensive loss of vegetation could pose further hazards to public safety, particularly when Costa Rica's rainy season returns in late April/early May.

US (AND COLOMBIA) SEND HELOS

¶6. (U) Following the earthquake, USAID/OFDA's regional office in San Jose worked closely with the GOCR's CNE to assess what international assistance could best help the relief efforts. The Ambassador authorized USD 50,000 to rent commercial helicopters to augment the government's efforts to evacuate the injured and homeless from the disaster area. But, as the magnitude of the damage became clearer, President Arias asked the Ambassador on January 9 for additional helicopter support. (His personal telephonic request followed a letter from Minister of Public Security Janina Del Vecchio.)

¶7. (U) On the afternoon of January 9, three UH-60 Blackhawk and one CH-47 Chinook JTF-B helicopters deployed from Honduras to help the GOCR. From January 10-12, these helicopters and U.S. military personnel rescued over 40 victims, including two injured (a host nation rescue worker with a broken leg and an elderly lady with contusions). JTF-B helicopters also transported over 200 rescue workers to and from the disaster zone, including the Ambassador and DCM who surveyed the damage and met with flight and rescue crews. The CH-47 Chinook airlifted a "Bobcat" excavation tractor to assist in digging out vehicles and structures. In a notable first for the region, the U.S. units were joined by, and worked very closely with, a Colombian Air Force UH-60. The Colombians, in addition to transporting rescue workers and their own personnel to the various sites, also transported the dead back to collection sites.

PRIVATE SECTOR PITCHES IN

¶8. (U) In addition to the official assistance by the USG, private American businesses have also stepped up to assist in the recovery effort. For example, Caterpillar's local outlet in Costa Rica, Matra, plans on donating machine rental time (16 machines in total for approximately three months free rental) to various municipalities throughout the disaster zone to assist in clean-up efforts.

OTHER INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE

¶9. (U) On January 13, the GOCR, via a MFA media release, thanked international donors for their assistance and asked for continued help. Amongst others, the GOCR recognized the U.S., China, France, Venezuela, Mexico, the rest of Central America, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, and some international organizations such as the EU, Rio Group and others. China offered \$100,000 in assistance and Venezuela announced that it was sending cots, tents, gas stoves, blankets and non-perishable food. The GOCR requested further assistance in the following areas:

-- international financing to reconstruct vital infrastructure such as bridges and roads;

-- reconstruction of homes; and

-- revitalization of local economies of affected areas, such as in agriculture and dairy farming.

NO AMCITS REPORTED SERIOUSLY HURT

¶10. (U) The landslides and severe road damage stranded an estimated 800 people, including approximately 300 tourists. All either made their own way out of the affected areas or were rescued. The Embassy was inundated with welfare and whereabouts inquiries from the United States about Americans traveling or living in Costa Rica, but to date, no American citizens have been reported killed or seriously injured, and there is no credible information to believe that any Americans are truly unaccounted for. One Amcit with a broken leg was medevac'd out of La Paz Waterfall Gardens Hotel a few hours after the earthquake struck. On January 9, the Consular section issued a warden message urging Americans in Costa Rica to contact their families and friends and update them on their welfare and whereabouts. The message also noted that most of Costa Rica was unaffected by the quake and that concerned individuals should continue to attempt to contact their loved ones directly via email or telephone.

MEDIA COVERAGE POSITIVE

¶11. (U) Costa Rican media coverage of the earthquake dominated the news, with USG assistance noted and appreciated in print, radio, television and online; many with front-page photographs of JTF-B personnel working with Costa Rican and Embassy counterparts. The most influential daily, La Nacion (cir. 120,000), reported on January 10 that the U.S. was the first to offer aid with the \$50,000 for helicopter rental and fuel purchase that enabled the first rescue efforts, followed by the JTF-B choppers and personnel. Popular centrist daily Al Dia (cir. 95,000) headlined a January 12 story "Military personnel an enormous help," and highlighted the U.S. and Colombian military personnel (the latter trained by the USG) and equipment that made prompt rescue possible. All major television channels carried footage of the U.S. helicopter assistance, and featured interviews with Embassy defense representatives and JTF-B personnel highlighting U.S. contributions.

¶12. (U) The GOCR decreed national days of mourning for the

victims from January 12-16, with the Costa Rican national colors at half-mast at all public buildings, and all official festivals suspended. The COM sent an official condolence letter on behalf of the USG and the American people and ordered that the U.S. flag outside the Embassy be lowered to half-mast during this same time period to honor the victims of the earthquake.

COMMENT: BECOMING A HABIT?

¶13. (SBU) Disaster relief is the sort of military assistance we, SOUTHCOM and JTF-B are happy to provide (although we hope it is not needed often). It is ironic that U.S. military assistance has become one of the first things President Arias calls for (indeed, expects) in times of national emergency. For the Costa Rican public, meanwhile, JTF-B Blackhawks and Chinooks have become welcome and tangible evidence of USG and U.S. military commitment to help when needed. Also, the sight of U.S. and Colombian crews working side by side to help Costa Ricans eloquently illustrated regional cooperation in action, and may serve as an excellent precedent for future humanitarian operations.

¶14. (SBU) We may have to tone down GOCR expectations, however. For this operation, we were almost backed into a corner by government-fueled, premature media reporting on January 8 and a release from Minister Del Vecchio on January 9 announcing that the helos were coming (when they had not yet been officially requested). In fact, the GOCR assumed that help was on the way as soon as the first informal query was made to us. JTF-B moves quickly, but there is a cost

involved for each major deployment, which may burn resources needed for future operations elsewhere in the region. Deployments must be based on considered need and an official request; not on presumptive advance announcements. It would have been extremely disappointing to Costa Rica (and damaging to the U.S. image) if we could not have been able to help so quickly in this disaster.

¶15. (SBU) There is still public diplomacy and capacity-building work to be done. Although media coverage has been extensive and positive, and public sentiment very thankful, the GOCR is typically faster to acknowledge others' contributions (and to complain about ours). President Arias publicly thanked the U.S. on January 12, for example, but complained in a TV press conference two days later that we should do more. Image is less important than actually helping in these cases, of course, but public diplomacy is an important asset here as we slowly and successfully employ U.S. military "soft power" in Costa Rica. The Arias administration cannot have JTF-B on speed dial without giving appropriate credit and understanding the extent of USG assistance. Minister of Public Security Del Vecchio wants to visit Soto Cano to personally thank the JTF-B personnel for their help and to learn how to better coordinate disaster operations with us. The first step may be to improve the GOCR's internal coordination, however. Once the disaster needs have been addressed, we will turn to these longer-term issues.

¶16. (SBU) This operation, and similarly heroic flood relief efforts in November, highlight the outstanding readiness and professionalism of our colleagues in JTF-B (as well as of our dedicated ODR section in the Embassy, which coordinated the JTF-B operations). We are deeply grateful for their assistance, and proud to work with them to help those in need.
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